

**Board of Veterans Services
Benefits Committee
Meeting Minutes
June 26, 2013**

DRAFT

A meeting of the Board of Veterans Services (BVS) Benefits Committee was held on Wednesday, June 26, 2013 at the Sitter & Barfoot Veterans Care Center, 1601 Broad Rock Boulevard, Richmond.

Members Present

- Kate Kohler, Committee Chairman
- William Nicholas
- Thad Jones, BVS Chairman
- Chip Moran, representing the Joint Leadership Council of Veterans Service Organizations

Members Absent

- Bill Haneke
- Al Sample

State Officials Present

- Lee Andes, State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) Assistant Director of Financial Aid
- John Anderson, Department of Veterans Services (DVS) Director of Benefits
- Steven Combs, DVS Director of Policy and Planning
- Annie Walker, DVS Director of the State Approving Agency (SAA) for Veterans Education and Training
- Cathy Wilson, DVS Deputy Commissioner

Materials Distributed

- Agenda
- Background information regarding DVS Benefit Services section mission, staffing, and training; state job classification and salary levels; and the Virginia Military Survivors and Dependents Education Program (VMSDEP)
- SCHEV VMSDEP 2013 Annual Update

Call to Order, Quorum Determination, and Agenda Approval

Chairman Kate Kohler called the meeting to order at 10:30 a.m. Four of six members were recorded as present and a quorum was determined. The agenda was approved by unanimous consent.

DVS Benefit Services - staffing

The committee reviewed and discussed the following matters related to the DVS Benefits Services section and its staffing:

- History, mission, and responsibilities of the Benefits Services section;
- Number of personnel assigned to the section and their assigned roles and duties;
- State law and department policy regarding the number of staff assigned to the section;
- State hiring and compensation practices;
- Salary levels of section personnel;
- Turnover among section personnel.

The committee members asked many questions during the review of DVS Benefits Section staffing, seeking clarifying or amplifying information and additional details.

It was the consensus of the committee that the DVS should create a staff development plan to serve as an effective management tool to recruit, hire, train, and, especially, to retain Benefits Section staff. It was further agreed that, based on this plan, DVS should identify the necessary funding to implement the plan in Fiscal Years 2015 and 2016 and submit a supporting budget request.

The committee agreed to bring these matters to the full Board at the July 24 meeting, in order for the Board to consider them as an Executive Order 29 (EO29) recommendation to the Governor and DVS as part of the legislative and budget development process for the 2014 General Assembly.

The committee requested that DVS research the starting salaries paid to claims agents in the states adjacent to Virginia and the salaries paid by veterans service organizations (VSOs) that have full-time, paid claims agents in Virginia. The committee requested that this information be provided to the committee.

DVS Benefit Services – claims agent training

The committee reviewed and discussed the following matters related to the DVS Benefits Services section claims agent training:

- Training requirements (state, department, federal);
- The section's training plan, including how claims agents are trained and by whom;
- Training opportunities – both DVS and VSO training.

The committee reviewed and discussed department and state training requirements, and whether DVS Benefit Field Offices should be closed on a regular basis (one day a month or ½ day per month, for example) in order to complete department, state, and federal training requirements.

It was the consensus of the committee, that, while training was essential to serving Virginia's veterans, it was equally as important that DVS Benefit Field Offices be open the maximum amount of time that current staffing resources permit, in order to best serve veterans seeking assistance and that any closures due to training are aggressively communicated to the veterans community far in advance through multiple channels, to include utilizing our partners at the JLC

and social media.

VMSDEP – overview and residency requirements

The committee reviewed and discussed the following matters related to the VMSDEP:

- Overview and history of the program;
- Number of students enrolled;
- Residency requirements;
- Residency requirements for VMSDEP, compared to other military- and veteran-related higher education programs in Virginia;
- Code of Virginia sections related to the VMSDEP.

Discussion focused on eligibility for the VMSDEP for the survivors and dependents of recently separated or retired military service members who do not meet the residency requirements for the VMSDEP but who meet all other requirements. The issue resolved around those veterans who, when they were on active duty, may not have been bona fide domiciliaries of the Commonwealth of Virginia for tax purposes, but who had a long-term physical presence in the Commonwealth because they were assigned to a duty station in Virginia. These new veterans have remained in Virginia after leaving active duty, and have or will take the steps required to establish domicile.

It was the consensus of the committee that this potentially small group of new veterans had demonstrated their commitment to the Commonwealth by their long-term physical presence in the Commonwealth and by their remaining in the Commonwealth after separation from the military. It was the consensus of the committee that a very limited change should be made to the VMSDEP residency requirements, as stated in the Code of Virginia, to expand eligibility to the eligible survivors and dependents of this small number of veterans who have shown a demonstrated commitment to Virginia.

The committee agreed to bring this matter to the full Board at the July 24 meeting, in order for the Board to consider this as an Executive Order 29 (EO29) recommendation to the Governor and DVS as part of the legislative and budget development process for the 2014 General Assembly.

Adjournment

There being no further business before the committee, the meeting adjourned at 1:30 p.m.